



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

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The Stepping Stone

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Chairperson's Corner

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Chairperson

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Unlike speaking skills, listening skills are not top-of-mind for improving communication skills. There are three reasons for this:

- Most people are unaware of the need to improve their listening skills. Poor listeners are like people with poor senses of humor. The lack of skill is more readily apparent to those around them.
- The benefits of improved listening skills appear less tangible. It may seem like you would just spend more time being silent, sedate and seated.
- What to do to become a good listener is not easily observable. Good listeners do not stand out like good speakers.

Test Your Listening Skills

To test your listening skills, count the number of "yes" answers to the questions below.

1. Do you interrupt people mid-sentence?
2. Do you multi-task during a conversation?
3. Are you busy preparing your response while they are still speaking?
4. Does your mind wander because you think you know what they are about to say?
5. Do you change the subject to a topic that you'd rather discuss?
6. Do you try to get the person to "get to the point" quickly?
7. Is it easier for you to hear the stated facts rather than the expressed emotions?
8. Do you try to present quick solutions to expressed problems?
9. Do you often stay behind your desk during a conversation?
10. Do you feel uncomfortable with spaces of silence during a conversation?

Here is your score, based on the number of "yes" answers:

- 0 You are the best! (You are also lying.)

1-3 Maybe you can focus on another communication skill before this one.

4-6 You could use improvement. Read on.

7-10 Buy a muzzle. Actually, you are the average listener. Read on.

The Benefits Of Listening

Listening skills improve the effectiveness of one-on-one communication. This is the most intimate form of communication and the basis upon which all relationships are built. This is why empathic listening is one of the "seven habits of highly effective people." Relationships are the key to good business, and listening skills can enhance relationships. After I invested some time to improve my listening skills, I was amazed at how it improved all of my relationships—both business and personal. I learned a great deal more about the people around me. I engaged people to tell richer stories about the issues that were important to them. I understood them better. I was then able to connect with them in a deeper way, and as a result, they understood me better as well.

How To Improve

There are various tactics you can employ to improve your listening skills. Some of the tactics are physical—your body language, the environment, etc. Others are mental—maintaining focus, listening for hidden meaning, etc. There are also verbal tactics, e.g., reflecting the meaning of what has been expressed.

The best resource I have come across on listening skills is a book recommended by the highly paid executive coach of an ex-colleague. The book is "People Skills," by Robert Bolton, a paperback (available on Amazon.com for \$10.40). If you only read chapters 2-4 (just 48 pages), you will have enough information to dramatically improve your listening skills. The book covers all the tactics referenced above, and much more.

Listening is the most over-looked communication skill, yet it can be the most important. After all, if nobody is listening, is anybody really communicating?

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